



Communication: a two-way street

In my last column, I promised to talk about messaging and how we can effectively convey the safety message to our Soldiers. I've pondered that a lot since then, and I'd like to share some thoughts with you now. Keep in mind I don't have a perfect solution for everyone, but this can at least serve as a conversation starter — after all, it's about communication!

First, and perhaps most importantly, neither I nor many of you talk the way Soldiers communicate with one another today. That's not a slam on anyone's age, it's just a fact. We're older, and instead of relating to young Soldiers as peers, we might come across as parental. Numerous men and women in our ranks are just a few short months or years removed from their Family homes, and they often view this communication style as equal parts frustrating and condescending. Obviously, that's not effective.

This is already a rules-based Army, and if you ask random young privates on the street what safety is about, they'll probably describe the pains of reflective belts and boring safety briefs. One idea to help us move past that mindset is to start utilizing the "great communicators" in our formations. You know who they are: the unofficial leaders of a platoon or battle buddy group. They know how to talk and make people listen; we need them to buy into and convey the safety message for us. They can be invaluable assets, but we have to let them have a role and voice first.

We must also frame our messages in a way that resonates within the ranks. Soldiers talking to Soldiers is the best method for actually communicating the message, but formulating what's to be said is a little more nuanced. Soldiers need to understand safety isn't just personal, that it's also part of the big picture of operational readiness. The trick is getting the individual Soldier to understand that by doing his or her part in thinking through risk and applying mitigation strategies, whether for on- or off-duty activities, they impact unit readiness. Soldiers aren't just a number filling a needed slot; our people make this Army great, and everyone, regardless of rank, plays an important part in the organization. We need to make them feel needed and necessary, because the simple fact is, they are.

The communication issue is one we've been trying to solve for many years, not just in safety but in all important areas in our Army. There isn't a perfect answer, and we shouldn't waste time chasing a magic bullet that doesn't exist. The art of communication is constantly evolving, and with the science of technology, it's changing faster than ever. I couldn't imagine text speak as a young twenty-something, just as many Soldiers today can't imagine party lines or rotary phones. But we ought to take the opportunity to learn from one another to determine the best means of communicating the critical message of safety as a personal and unit readiness imperative, i.e., a combat multiplier.

As leaders, we all acknowledge safety is relevant in everything we do. Getting Soldiers to understand that is the challenging part, and if nothing else, I hope I've given you some ideas to think about. With spring already here and summer just around the corner, we need to start communicating our messages now. Ask your Soldiers what they think and take their answers seriously. Communication can be effective only if it's two way.

Enjoy these first days of spring, and remember, to really play hard, we must always play it safe.

Army Safe is Army Strong!

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